**SECTION 3: ANCIENT GREEK COMEDY  
Chapter 8: Early Greek Comedy and Satyr Plays**

<http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/081earlygkcom.htm>

I. Introduction: An Overview of Classical and Post-Classical Greek Comedy

Though comedy in the broadest sense of the term—any kind of humorous material—is at least as old as Greek civilization, historical evidence suggests *dramatic* comedy first arose in or just before the Classical Age. Like tragedy, ancient Greek ***komoidia***, the word from which we get "comedy," eventually found a home at the **Dionysia**, though it achieved official status only significantly later than its close theatrical kin. The data further suggest this so-called Old Comedy was probably not the first form of comic drama performed at the Dionysia. Instead, pre-classical playwrights were composing short humorous "satyr plays" featuring boisterous bands of lusty, mischievous woodland spirits called satyrs. During the Classical Age, satyr plays followed the presentation of tragic trilogies, making them the oldest form of comic drama extant.

[](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/comicchoruswomen.jpg)If slower to rise than the satyr play, Old Comedy eventually gained attention and acclaim—and finally pre-eminence—by the end of the fifth century. Indeed, the first writer of this genre whose works are preserved entire is Aristophanes, a late classical comic poet whose plays, like Old Comedy in general, are raucous and political, closely tied to current affairs. He often satirizes Athenian politicians and public figures with ribald wit, usually proposing wild and extravagant solutions, both serious and satirical, to a wide range of problems confronting society in his day: everything from tactics for ending the Peloponnesian War to tips on keeping the devilish Euripides in line. Old Comedies must have been fairly expensive to mount—the costume budget alone has to have been extravagant—though the Athenians of the Classical Age evidently felt the visual and comic rewards were great enough to warrant such an investment.

But with the Spartans' victory at the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War (404 BCE) came tighter budgets and a graver political situation for Athens. Aristophanes' last two surviving comedies which were written in the early years of the fourth century (the Post-Classical Age) show the effect of these constraints. They call for fewer "special effects" and less novel and elaborate choral odes—in one play, there are virtually no original songs at all!—and derive humor, instead, from standard comic situations and stereotypical characters.

So began a period that was later called "Middle Comedy," covering a long, murky half-century for which no ancient comic drama is preserved whole or even close to complete. While it is possible to trace some of the changes theatre underwent in this day, little is known for certain. Toward the end of the fourth century (ca. 320 BCE), Greek comedy finally re-emerges into the light of history in a very different-looking form, revolving for the most part around stereotypes and improbable coincidences, making this period in more ways than one the "Age of New Comedy."

The acknowledged master of this genre is Menander, the last great Athenian dramatist of antiquity. Given a series of stock comic scenarios and a pat roster of clownish personas, he forged not only one of the enduring genres of theatre, "the comedy of manners," but also one of the greatest vehicles ever for reflecting upon life and society. While there is hardly any aspect of humanity he does *not* touch on, if Menander's drama has a focus, it is the importance of humane parenting, the abiding importance of fathers, patriarchs and guardians showing a compassion commensurate with compulsion.

His dramatic signature was character, and from what little we can see of the tattered remains of his work—this opinion is also confirmed by several ancient critics—the characters who people his stage are indeed among the best ever written. Often he modified or even played against their conventional caricatures, so, for instance, "managing slaves" who in other plays are predictably clever and manipulative are in Menander never incredibly ingenious. To the contrary, they find themselves sometimes in desperate straits they did not foresee, where they panic or freeze with fear like real people. Similarly, Menander's bragging soldiers put up a bold front, but behind their grim façades lurk simpering lovers more apt to suffer the pain they traditionally threaten on others.

If Menander's plots seem today to revolve around trite situations and improbable coincidences, we must remember two things. First, the comic situations that drive his plays may not have looked as trite in his day as they do in ours. And, second, even if they did, in deploying what are now conventional soap-opera crises and resolutions, often based on luck, he may be making an intentional choice. Such trivial plot devices afforded Menander the opportunity to focus the audience's attention not on *what* happens in a play but on *how* it happens.

In other words, predictable plots proved for him a good background against which to highlight characters and personalities, his clear intention as a playwright. More often than not, this results in what reads today as not very funny comedy—the grim facts of life often leave little room for comic byplay—thus, the thrust of Menandrean drama drives, instead, at only a snicker of recognition, if even that, and never the hysterical convulsions Aristophanes aimed for and so readily achieved. All in all, if Menander's comedy has any explicit goal, it is to teach as much as to delight, leaving us many lessons based on his wise and gentle observations about the characters we watch and are.

II. The Origin of Greek Comedy

Humor extends as far back in Greek culture as written records go. The "font of all literature," Homer's epics include several humorous passages, such as the famous ***Dios Apate*** ("The Seduction of Zeus") of *The Iliad*, in which the omnipotent chief god finds himself the object of his own wife Hera's sexual advances. It's a classic comic scene inasmuch as her invitation to the bedroom is actually a ploy to distract him while her cohorts work behind his back.

Homer paints a comical picture of other gods in his other surviving work, *The Odyssey*. There he recounts how **Aphrodite and Ares** had a secret affair and, when her husband Hephaestus learned the truth, he set a trap of invisible chains above Aphrodite's bed and caught the lovers *in flagrante delicto*. When he calls his fellow gods and goddesses to witness the lovers' shame, the goddesses refuse, but the male gods comply, not only to shake their heads in disgust at the revolting, illicit business but, as Homer makes clear, also to see the gorgeous goddess of sex naked. As they stand around shaking their heads and reviewing the revealing tableau, one god says to another quietly in the background, "Isn't that humiliating for Ares? How much would you give to trade places with him?" And the other god replied, "All the gold I have. Just let me lie with her!" So, humor is at least as old as Homer, probably all humankind.

But comedy, in the sense of "humorous drama," can be traced back no further than the sixth century BCE. The word ***komoidia*** means literally in Greek "party (*kom*-) song (-*oid-*)" and, if this is any indication of its origin, then dramatic comedy stems from revels (***komoi***; singular ***komos***) where partiers (***komastai***) sang songs (*oidai*) in which they teased, mocked and made fools of spectators or public figures. Though the historical records reveal little about the way this might have happened, somehow *komoidia* must have migrated from the banquet hall to the music hall, perhaps around the same time when tragedy was beginning to evolve.

Early Greek **vase paintings**, not written texts, provide at present our best view of dramatic comedy in its primordial stages, in particular, depictions of what seem to be comic choruses. Dating to the mid-sixth century BCE, some vases show *komastai* dressed as horses, birds, and dolphins prefiguring the choruses of later fifth-century Old Comedy (see [below](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/081earlygkcom.htm#oldcomedyorigins)) in which choristers often represented animals. If indeed these paintings reflect pre-classical comic theatre, it seems safe to conclude that, just as in early tragedy, the chorus initially played an important role in Greek comedy.

But there were, no doubt, differences, too. For example, choruses in Old Comedy, unlike in tragedy, addressed the audience directly in a song called the *parabasis* (see [below](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/081earlygkcom.htm#parabasis)), meaning literally "the act of going aside," because the chorus "stepped aside" (i.e. out of their dramatic roles) and became the playwright's overt mouthpiece, stating his views directly to the listeners. Though the *parabasis* disappeared after the classical period, the apparent prominence of the chorus early on and the vases depicting animal costumes suggest to some scholars that this "step-aside" may have commanded center stage in the primordial phase of comedy's evolution.

[](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/earlyCorinthiancomiccharacters.jpg)But the case is not so simple. Other evidence indicates that comedy, unlike tragedy, was imported into Athens from other parts of the Greek world, particularly through a genre called **Dorian farce**. Indeed, an early vase from Corinth depicts what seems to be a scene from a comic drama of some sort, in which thieves are stealing wine and being punished. Other sixth-century vases contain representations of the gods, heroes and daily life, all portrayed by actors wearing grotesque masks and short garments that reveal padded buttocks and huge ***phalloi*** (singular, ***phallos***) ([note](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/notes/081/n08101.htm)). Other similar vases show characters commonly found in later comedy: cooks, angry old men, drunken old women, and sneaky slaves. Exactly how these images elucidate the evolution of comic drama is far from clear, but they prove that the presentation of humor in some sort of theatrical mode was well under way even before the dawn of the Classical Age.

Evidently, comedy also got off to an early start in **Sicily**, another part of the Dorian world. The evidence here does not stem from vases alone, because fragments of comic dramas exist, attached to the name of an early Sicilian comic playwright, **Epicharmus of Syracuse**. It is too bad, then, that it is impossible to determine with any precision when this dramatist lived and wrote—it may have been any time from 530 to 440 BCE, or even [](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/comicoldman.jpg)later—but any date on the early end of this range would make Epicharmus the contemporary of the earliest Athenian comic playwrights and, in that case, a crucial figure in the formulation of dramatic comedy. Unfortunately, there is nothing certain about him.

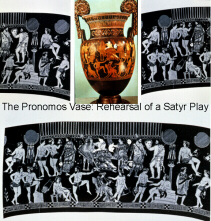
For instance, Epicharmus' great contribution to comedy is said to have been the introduction of the *agon*, a contest between two characters debating some issue, later [a regular feature of classical tragedy](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/073gktrageur.htm#agon) and sometimes Old Comedy, too. The association of Epicharmus with the *agon*, however, may be a post-classical retrojection of later dramatic conventions, a fabrication designed to connect a shadowy, poorly attested ancestor with some concrete element of the tradition. Along the same lines, Epicharmus also purportedly invented certain comic characterizations which later became closely associated with specific mythological figures, such as the cowardly Odysseus and the gluttonous Heracles, but again this information comes from late sources. No indisputable [primary evidence](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/011intro.htm#detectives) confirms this is true.

All in all, whether or not Epicharmus and his Dorian brethren played a role in the early formulation of dramatic comedy, Thalia ("good cheer"), the Muse of Comedy, eventually set up residence among their Ionian kin, in particular, the democracy-loving, free-thinking Athenians of the Classical Age who incorporated *komoidia* into their innovative festival, the City Dionysia. By the second half of the fifth century, it had established itself in that arena and was flourishing as never before.

III. Satyr Plays  
  
[](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/bellkraterPaestum.jpg)But comedy—or the type of play called that—is not the earliest form of comic drama on record. **Satyr plays**, another genre of humorous theatre, were part and parcel of the Greek tragedians' work as far back as the evidence allows us to see. At some point before or during the early Classical Age, the custom developed that a playwright competing at the Dionysia presented a trilogy of tragedies rounded off with a light-hearted satyr play. And even though only one such play (Euripides' *Cyclops*; see [Reading 3](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/082reading3cyclops.htm)) has survived from antiquity complete, there is much information extant about satyr plays. For instance, all evidence points to their following a predictable scenario: the rowdy satyrs intrude upon a standard myth, stir up comic havoc, nearly disrupt its set course, but in the end the traditional resolution of the myth is preserved and the satyrs head off for another jolly adventure. With that, the reason why these plays became popular seems obvious; the bigger question is how and when.

More than just the earliest dramatic comedy attested, satyr plays are also among the earliest plays known. Though no pre-classical satyr play has survived to our day, there is sound evidence they existed before 480 BCE, as did the tradition of **satyrs**themselves, Greek mythological figures of great antiquity. Hesiod, for example, an epic poet who lived around 700 BCE, calls these half-man, half-beast divinities "brothers of wood nymphs" and "good-for-nothing and [](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/PraxitelesSatyrpouringwine.JPG)mischievous." On Greek vases, they have a long history, too, both before and after the Classical Age. To wit, the post-classical Greek sculptor Praxiteles sculpted a famous statue in antiquity, "The Satyr Pouring Wine."

Furthermore, from fairly early on there appears to have been a rather intricate mythology surrounding satyrs—much like that involving fairies in Shakespeare's day—further testimony to their popularity. For instance, the satyrs had a leader named **Silenus**, sometimes called their "father," who can at times be wise, philosophical or ironical. Nevertheless, like his satyr kin, he more often craves drink and dance and, in general, likes to cavort and misbehave, [](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/Silenus&Sphinx.jpg)especially sexually. His modern cultural progeny can be found on the beaches of Florida during Spring Break.

Satyrs were less long-lived on stage, however. While rising quickly and early, the satyr play as a viable form of drama went extinct with comparable alacrity. History chronicles very few serious artists writing new satyr plays during or after the fourth century BCE, which is not to say that later ages did not appreciate the genre—[the Roman mosaic of Aeschylus directing a satyr play](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/071gktragaes.htm#mosaic) attests to an enduring memory of its dramatic delights—only that after the Classical Age the satyr play was no longer a vehicle for original creative expression. While some evidence exists that Romans as late as the second-century CE composed satyr plays, these were probably only antiquarian [](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/pronomosvase.JPG)exercises, not innovative nor even intended as viable theatrical pieces.

Nor was the satyr play a species of drama which made an impact comparable to that of tragedy. Though it surely contributed in some meaningful way to the history of theatrical comedy, the satyr play early on gave way to Old Comedy as the principal vehicle of humorous drama. This is no surprise, either, since satyr plays had two obvious strikes against them. First, their humor rested largely on a limited gimmick—the satyrs intrude upon and disrupt a conventional myth—which, while giving the play a clear structure, left less than ample room for the type of genius which comic theatre at its best can foster. Second, because of this, the attraction of these plays depended on the audience's understanding and appreciation of the myth being ridiculed, often in a dramatic form, and with the decline of tragedy after the Classical Age anything which depended on it naturally declined, too. In essence, satyr plays constituted a good, early attempt at comic theatre, which burned its way across the stage brightly but rapidly and over time was replaced with a more successful type—or rather types—of dramatic comedy.

However, the history of satyr plays is informative of more than just the evolution of an extinct theatrical genre. It may help map the course of early drama, in general, since it can serve as an important test of theories concerning Western theatre's nascence. Aristotle, for instance, the archetypical "[lumper](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/021origins.htm" \l "lumperssplitters)," saw in satyric drama an early stage of tragedy, and early Greek vase-paintings of satyrs seem to support this proposition. Certainly, satyrs maintained a strong presence in the popular imagination of the classical Greeks. Still, it is not clear whether these vases depict satyrs in drama, or just satyrs in general. All in all, the remote origin of the satyr play stands, like that of tragedy, on the horizon of history, and though we hold tantalizing clues as to its birth and role in early theatre, there is little definite that can be said.

The earliest known playwright of satyr plays is **Pratinas**—also a tragic poet as discussed above (see [Chapter 7](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/071gktragaes.htm#pratinas))—whom some scholars have suggested was, in fact, the inventor of the satyr play, at least in the form it was popularized later in the fifth century. The surviving titles of his plays indeed suggest that thirty or more were satyric. It seems natural then that, if he invented the genre, his corpus would include a disproportionate number of satyr plays.

**Aeschylus** also was well-known as a composer of satyr plays (see [Chapter 7](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/071gktragaes.htm#aeschylus)), perhaps another debt he owed to his great predecessor Pratinas. Several titles of Aeschylus' satyr plays hint at their dramatic content. For instance, Aeschylus' ***Prometheus the Fire-Bringer***was a satyr [](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/Prometheusandsatyrs.jpg)play treating the same general subject as Aeschylus' extant tragedy [*Prometheus Bound*](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/071gktragaes.htm#prometheusbound), an excellent example of the way classical playwrights felt free to approach the same myth both tragically and comically. To judge from its fragmentary remains, *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* involved the satyrs disrupting in typical fashion the famous tale of Prometheus delivering fire to humankind.

Traditionally, the philanthropic Titan arrives as a savior on earth to give his great gift to humans but in the satyr play he lands instead amidst a band of satyrs who steal the fire, and then proceed to do what satyrs do best, that is, eat it and kiss it—perhaps worse! At some point in the play, Prometheus warns one of them, "Watch it, old man! You'll singe your beard!" Unfortunately, we know very little else about this play, though there may be a representation of it on a Greek vase dating to the early Classical Age. If so, it attests further to the popularity of Aeschylus' drama in the day, as well as satyr plays in general.

There is evidence, too, of how widely this genre enjoyed a certain popularity even after the Classical Age. Sizable portions of ***The Trackers***, a satyr play by Sophocles, have been recovered on an Egyptian papyrus—someone in later antiquity must have liked it enough to own a copy—and though the papyrus provides only pieces of *The Trackers*, which makes it hard to gauge the play's general tenor or quality, in one of the better attested scenes the satyrs imitate dogs tracking a scent. This scenario rich in potential for physical comedy displays the comic side of Sophocles' genius, for us a rare glimpse into this aspect of the tragedian's work.

The one complete surviving satyr play written in the Classical Age comes from the hand of Euripides, who we know from his work in tragedy was quite proficient at comedy on stage. Thus, we are fortunate to have a satyr play of his, which, as it turns out, is quite entertaining. Called ***Cyclops***, this play has a setting typical of the genre. The satyrs, as usual, find themselves embroiled in a traditional myth, in this case, trapped in the cave of the Cyclops **Polyphemus** with **Odysseus**, a famous passage from Homer's *Odyssey*. [Reading #3](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/082reading3cyclops.htm), below, includes a more detailed introduction to this satyr play, along with a translation of several scenes from the drama.

IV. The Origin of Old Comedy

In 486 BCE a competition began at the Dionysia among strictly comic playwrights, as opposed to tragedians appending satyr plays onto tragic trilogies. The [victory lists](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/071gktragaes.htm#victorylists)suggest this date, as do later records giving playwrights' names and even some titles of early Old Comedies. Moreover, the reason for such an innovation at this particular time is not unfathomable. In general, periods of general tension like the years encompassing the Persian Wars in classical Greece—or, more recently, World War II and the 1940's—have led to innovations in artistic, political and religious customs, on the reasoning that new and better things suit times of high social stress and rapid cultural change.

It is no surprise, then, that a new form of drama was imported into the Dionysia in the 480's BCE. The victory of the Athenians at Marathon during the First Persian War (490 BCE) went a long way toward confirming to them the validity of their experiments with life, liberty, and the gods' will. Moreover, tragedy, already well under way, was there to serve as guide to the new genre of comedy, like an older sister telling a younger one what school will be like.

It also suggested a general scheme on which comic drama could be formulated, and indeed early Greek comedy seems to have borrowed many features wholesale from its elder "sibling": the opening monologue, the *parodos* (the opening choral song), the alternating rhythm of episode and chorus, and the *agon*. Through another sort of borrowing, comedy also inverted features common in tragedy. Noble characters, for instance, were made base, sacred odes became bawdy ballads, and solemn dances turned into lascivious strip-teases, like the infamous *kordax* dance (literally, "the rope") mentioned by Aristophanes in *The Clouds* (540).

[](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/slavespusholdmanupladder.jpg)There were other important differences between comedy and tragedy in the Classical Age. Primarily, **comic plots** were considerably looser than those of tragedy. To wit, scenes do not necessarily follow each other logically, showing that it was more important for early comic playwrights to be funny than tell a coherent story. Even Aristophanes, who worked towards the end of the fifth century, constructed plots which are not always particularly well integrated, often taking unexpected and inexplicable turns in the story wherever and however humor was best served.

There are at least two reasons for this. First, the art of comic drama was still in its infancy, and playwrights had not as yet developed ways of integrating comedy and complex plot construction. Second, because of its nature audiences and critics did not take the art of writing dramatic comedy as seriously as tragic playwriting and so did not view comic storylines with a critical eye or a sense that they *should* be realistic, much less logical. Aristotle himself seems to have recognized this (*Poetics* 5.1449b):

On the one hand, the changes of tragedy and through whom it came into being is not unknown, but comedy because of not being taken seriously from early on is unknown. For the archon only at a late date provided a chorus to comic playwrights; rather they (i.e. choristers) were volunteers. But when it (i.e. comedy) already acquired some features, those who are called its poets are (finally) noted (i.e. in the historical records extant in Aristotle's day). Who introduced masks or prologues or a multitude of actors and such like things are not known. The making of tales (i.e. plots) originally came from Sicily, but of the Athenians Crates first began, by discarding the abusive scheme as a whole, to construct stories and tales.

In other words, as is so often sadly true, what was not said in serious words was not taken seriously. Greek comedy would have to wait until the next century to be considered an art form on par with tragedy—and even so, only when it finally adopted a more "serious" tone.

Thus, the whole issue of comedy's origin is a deviling question, one considerably harder to fathom than that of tragedy since there were evidently few reliable data extant even in Aristotle's day. That leaves little hope modern scholars will be able to go much further without new and better information. Even the few definitive statements Aristotle makes in the passage quoted above are not unchallengeable.

For instance, to suppose that complex plot-crafting was introduced to comedy in Sicily during the Classical Age assumes a high degree of skill in drama. For a Sicilian playwright to be able to make such a contribution would have required advanced theatre technology for the day—at the very least, a playing arena of some sort—and a level of expertise at least equal to that of the Athenian playwrights in the day, all of which seems unlikely ([see above](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/081earlygkcom.htm#epicharmus)). As with tragedy, theories positing the origin of dramatic comedy outside of Athens depend on scant and secondary evidence. Likewise, comedy cannot be traced with any certainty back to Dionysian influences, despite the circumstantial evidence one might use to link it to the rituals surrounding the worship of Dionysus. All in all, it seems best to circumvent the fraught and devious question of comedy's nascence and skip ahead to where the data for Old Comedy actaully begin, a point which is, sad to say, well past its origin.

V. Old Comedy before Aristophanes

Among the first documented events in the early history of Old Comedy is that at some time around 440 BCE drama in general, and comedy in particular, was given an additional venue, the **Lenaea**, a festival with close associations to the Dionysia. At both ceremonies, comedies and tragedies were presented, though the tragic competition at the Lenaea seems never to have achieved the acclaim that the Dionysia did. To wit, only two tragedians competed at the Lenaea, as opposed to the three, or four or five—the number seems to have changed over time—whose works were performed at the Dionysia. Also, because the Lenaea was held in the dead of winter (December/January), there were no foreign dignitaries in the audience.

But despite its second-rate status, the Lenaea was clearly of great importance to the burgeoning art of dramatic comedy. For instance, it significantly increased the number of opportunities for comic playwrights to produce new work and, as such, is a measure of growing popular interest in comedy. Furthermore, because comedies at both festivals were always presented as single works instead of trilogies, the comic playwrights had in general far fewer opportunities than tragedians to showcase their work. The addition of a new dramatic festival featuring comedy doubled the art form's public visibility. With that, it is easy to see why the Lenaea was always more famous for its [](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/images/08/comicchorusbirds.jpg)comedies than its tragedies.

The nature of Old Comedy is also very different from that of tragedy. Full of outlandish characters, costumes and settings, Old Comedy is at heart an exuberant and joyous celebration of the human condition in all of its excesses. In Aristophanes' *Birds*, for instance, the individuals comprising the chorus are dressed as different birds, and the action takes place in a magical never-never-land between heaven and earth, called "Cloudcuckooland," as imaginative a play as it was surely expensive to produce. Old Comedy indulged in other excesses, too. The *phallus*, an exaggerated representation of the erect male member, ensured that male characters were unmistakable in the immense Theatre of Dionysus, as if those characters' typical behavior left open any question about their gender ([note](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/notes/081/n08103.htm)).

Another, and perhaps more telling, feature of Old Comedy is a distinctive section of the play called the ***parabasis*** ("step-aside"), a choral ode addressed directly to the audience and voiced through the author and not the characters as such. That is, in the *parabasis* the playwright takes the opportunity at a break in the stage action to discourse at liberty on whatever subject he wishes, not necessarily having to do with the play as such: the condition of the city at that moment, why he and not the other competitors should win the first prize, or anything else the author feels the need to say. The obvious *para*-theatrical nature of the *parabasis*—it constitutes a clear disruption in the dramatic illusion—is not out of line with Old Comedy in general, which often toyed with the fact that the story was, in fact, a show being presented before an audience. Characters in Aristophanes' audiences more than once allude to, if not point at and ridicule directly, individuals sitting in the audience.

Thus, there was clearly no **"fourth wall"** in Old Comedy, though some in the audience may have wished there had been, which accords well with the nature of the plots of these plays, invariably less coherent than boisterous. That is, when the playwright is focused primarily on winning laughs and a first-place award and only secondarily on matters like plot construction, the resulting construct is likely to become episodic, affording frequent changes of location, because the drama must follow the path of humorous delight before all else. Even the main character's central purpose in Aristophanes' drama can be lost amidst the riotous revelry of an Old Comedy dénouement. In sum, it is difficult to categorize a typical Old Comedy—especially so when only Aristophanes' plays are extant—but unlike "goat-song," "party song" is not a bad place to begin.

A. Athenian Poets of Old Comedy Before the Rise of Aristophanes

**Chionides**, the earliest Athenian comic poet known today, is little more than a name attached to a few play titles: *Beggars*, *Heroes*, and *Persians*. His name appears on the victory lists around the year 486 BCE. That is really all that can be said about the first known comic playwright.

About **Magnes**, a near contemporary of his, we know a bit more, since he seems to have been quite popular, winning at least eleven times at the Dionysia and exerting a more lasting influence on comedy than Chionides. To wit, in one of Aristophanes' early plays (*Knights*) he recalls how the fickle Athenian public had at one time rejected Magnes when he became older and less sharp-witted. This recollection may not be entirely nostalgic, since Magnes' plays have titles reminiscent of Aristophanes' plays, such as *Frogs*, *Dionysus*, *Birds*, and *Lydians*, so Aristophanes may be hinting to the judges that they can atone for their ancestors' injustice to Magnes by awarding his modern heir a first prize.

The comic playwrights who followed Chionides and Magnes intersect with the period when Aristophanes was active. Thus, with only two names preserved, a few titles and anecdotes and the occasional random fragment free of dramatic context, it seems safe to say the data for early evolution of comedy are scanty indeed. By all fair standards, then, this dramatic genre enters the stage of history only in the next generation.

**1. Cratinus**

In the second half of the fifth century appeared the first of the great names later synonymous with Old Comedy. If one may trust [the Roman poet Horace](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/151romtrag.htm#arspoetica) who put Cratinus' name on a par with Aristophanes and [Eupolis](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/081earlygkcom.htm" \l "eupolis)**, Cratinus** was an older contemporary of Aristophanes and probably competed against him more than once ([note](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/notes/081/n08104.htm)). According to Aristotle, he was the first Athenian comic playwright to compose "generalized" plots, by which the philosopher probably means that Cratinus first devised plots which were not solely spoofs of specific, current situations in Athens.

But Aristotle's information cannot be taken at face value without corroboration, which is lacking. Fortunately, other data are not. Cratinus is known to have won nine dramatic victories: six at the Dionysia, and three at the Lenaea. More than five hundred quotes from his plays survive today, along with twenty-seven play titles, from which it is clear his plays were awash in the bitter criticism of contemporary politicians and public figures like [Pericles](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/051clasgk.htm#pericles).

One instance of this is preserved in a comedy of his entitled ***Dionysalexandros*** ("Dionysus Does Paris"), in which Cratinus denounces the great general and leader of classical Athens for having needlessly brought down the Peloponnesian War on Athens. While the play itself is now lost, a *hypothesis* ("outline") describing its action has been partially recovered on papyrus ([note](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/notes/081/n08105.htm)).

Here is a translation of that *hypothesis* (with supplementary notes; please note that the beginning of the *hypothesis* is missing):

. . . the god Dionysus urgently tries to persuade Hermes to gather the goddesses (for the Judgment of Paris) and Hermes leaves. The chorus of satyrs address the audience directly about poets (the *[parabasis](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/081earlygkcom.htm" \l "parabasis)*), and when Dionysus comes back on, they mock and abuse him. The goddesses appear and offer him things (i.e. Hera unshakable power, Athena good fortune in war, Aphrodite the loveliest and sexiest looks)—he chooses her (Aphrodite). Then he sails to Sparta, carries off Helen, and returns to Troy. A little later he hears that the Greeks are ravaging the land and flees to (the real?) Paris/Alexander. He puts Helen in a coop like a goose and disguises himself as a ram and waits for the inevitable (attack?). Paris comes on and detects the thief. He orders both to be taken to the (Greek) ships and turned over to the Greeks. When Helen looks frightened, he takes pity on her and keeps her around a little longer to make her his wife and sends off Dionysus to be turned over (to the Greeks). The satyrs follow, cheering him up and claiming that they won't turn him over. Pericles is ridiculed in this drama most plausibly and openly for having involved the Athenians in the (Peloponnesian) war.

During Cratinus' day the Athenians, in part, believed that the cause of the Peloponnesian War lay in Pericles' aggressive attitude toward the cities in the vicinity of Athens and, because his long-standing girlfriend Aspasia had connections to the nearby community of Megara, some assumed that Pericles had initiated hostilities in order to keep or satisfy her in some way. Clearly in *Dionysalexandros* Aspasia is "Helen" and Pericles is "Paris/Alexander." This overt satire of the popular perception of Periclean policies supports the claim that political comedy typified Cratinus' drama, though by other accounts he was capable of other types of comedy, too—or so we'll see in [the next chapter](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/091aristoph.htm#pytine).

**2. Pherecrates**

Another older contemporary of Aristophanes, **Pherecrates** was "ingenious in story construction," our sources say. Sadly, none of his plays—or even the *hypotheses* of their plots—remain. Of Pherecrates' dramatic output, nineteen titles have survived along with about three hundred quotes.

B. Eupolis

But the greatest of Aristophanes' contemporaries—and his foremost rival—was **Eupolis**. While no complete play by Eupolis survives, we have nineteen titles and around five hundred quotes from a body of work which included three victories at the Lenaea and one at the Dionysia. This sizeable corpus is all the more impressive because Eupolis died relatively young, at some point during the Peloponnesian War. According to later historical sources, the loss of Eupolis proved such a source of grief to the Athenians that they henceforth exempted poets from military service, a proverbial tale, no doubt, built to showcase the greater truth of Eupolis' tremendous comic talent and the respect his drama commanded in the years and centuries after the playwright's premature demise. If an overstatement, it's really not much of one to rate Eupolis' death among the more devastating blows that befell Athens at the close of the Classical Age.

To wit, several papyri from Egypt during the Roman age (after 30 BCE) have been found containing fragments of Eupolis' plays, attesting to his enduring popularity well into later antiquity. The largest of these contains a substantial portion of ***The Demes***, a comedy Eupolis presented some time after 418 BCE ([note](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/notes/081/n08106.htm)). Unfortunately, it is hard to gauge an Old Comedy in pieces, since scenes do not necessarily have to cohere logically or follow a predictable scheme. So if the portion we have of *The Demes*appears a bit dry and sententious to readers today, it's important to remember that this bit of the play may not be indicative of its general nature. Preachy political advice certainly does not appear to be "typical" of Eupolis, at least to judge from all the other evidence extant about him.

While Eupolis' satire may indeed have been less bitter than Cratinus'—or even Aristophanes', as we are told by later critics—a wider view of his drama suggests his plots were, in general, strong, with dramatic situations well-contrived for comedy. For instance, ***The Taxiarchs*** ("The Ship-Captains," again named for the play's chorus) featured the effeminate god Dionysus serving in the Athenian navy. Such a situation has a real potential for humor, as quotations from the play attest.

For instance, the lack of good food and the harsh conditions under which the navy labored, especially in the later stages of the Peloponnesian War, would not appeal to the pampered Asian deity who in his comic persona is cowardly and weak. Here, Dionysus laments to some unnamed comrade about the difficulties of military life:

**FRIEND:** What! You? Dionysus? Not wearing your usual designer shirt?   
(*feeling the shirt*) Disgusting! Has this thing ever been washed?   
**DIONYSUS:** When it was new, it had five pounds of heavy weave, so help me . . . me!   
**FRIEND**: Well, now it's a ton and a half of dirt.

To Eupolis' credit, Aristophanes later borrowed not only the effeminate Dionysus of *The Taxiarchs* but also its famous rowing scene, importing both wholesale into his consummate comic masterpiece *The Frogs* (see [Reading 9](http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/092reading4frogs.htm)). Indeed, the highest tribute one playwright can pay another is to steal his work out of hand. So, if Aristophanes can applaud his prestigious colleague and rival—clapping, albeit, with the back of his hand—even if blinded by the dust of history, should we not stand and cheer as well?